



Department
for Education

Research Priorities and Questions

Teachers and Teaching

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General approach to research needs and priorities

Robust evidence needs to inform policy and practice in order to deliver effective education and children's services. As Ben Goldacre suggests in his visionary paper '*Building Evidence into Education*'¹, many stakeholders can be part of the effort to raise both the quality and use of research.

The Department is publishing research priorities and questions across a range of policy areas during 2013, to encourage practitioners, academics and sector bodies to consider future evidence. These questions may prompt new research on early years, schools and children's services. The Department will use the priorities as a guide for its future commissioning of research, although that research is very unlikely to cover all the questions listed in the documents.

Views about recent findings, ongoing research or evidence gaps are warmly welcomed. Please email us at Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.

¹ Available to download at [DfE Analytical Review](#)

Teachers and Teaching: the policy context

Evidence is clear that the quality of teaching matters a great deal.² It is the single most important school-based factor determining pupils' educational outcomes, and has a substantial impact on future labour market outcomes.³ Improving the quality of teaching is therefore a key priority for the Department; one of the ways in which we can achieve this is by raising awareness of what the most effective practice looks like, and supporting teachers to share their own experiences of what works.

Our ambition is to support the development of a “self-improving” schools system; a system in which teachers take responsibility for identifying and addressing improvement needs (for themselves, their schools, and the system as a whole), and where outstanding teaching practice, based on strong evidence, is built and shared through collaboration and partnership. In support of the self-improving system, the Department will continue to build understanding about the impacts our policies are having. However, in order for the evidence base to be of real practical use to teachers, they themselves must play an increasingly important part in **building a common evidence base that can be tested and challenged**.

Our programme of policy reform has focused on a number of key areas that evidence tells us can drive long-term improvements to the quality of teachers and teaching:

- Getting the right people into the profession, making teaching an attractive option for the highest possible calibre of candidate with the right mixture of skills and knowledge;
- Giving schools greater responsibility for the selection, recruitment and training of new teachers;
- Improving the quality of teachers already in the profession, encouraging high-quality professional development that promotes a culture of practice based on evidence of what works;
- Reducing central prescription, giving headteachers greater flexibility in key areas such as teacher pay and performance management; and,
- Underpinning all of the above, securing the supply of high-quality school leadership.

² See, for example, Slater, H., Davies, N. and Burgess, S. (2009), ‘Do teachers matter? Measuring the variation in teacher effectiveness in England’, Working Paper No. 09/212, Centre for Market and Public Organisation, University of Bristol. Available at: [CMPO: Do Teachers Matter?](#)

³ Chetty, R., Friedman, J., and Rockoff, J. (2011), ‘The Long-term Impacts of Teachers: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood’, NBER Working Paper No 17699, National Bureau of Economic Research. Available at: [NBER Teacher Value-added](#)

We are building teachers' and leaders' capacity for peer-to-peer improvement, disseminating outstanding evidence-based practice through, for example, the network of over 300 teaching school alliances, and the expanded networks of National Leaders of Education (NLE) and National Support Schools (NSS).

The high level research need

At a high level, our priority is to work together with teachers to **promote the creation, dissemination and – most importantly of all – the effective use of high-quality evidence about effective approaches to pedagogy and classroom practice**, helping to build a body of knowledge that supports continuous improvement.

We also need to **understand whether the policy reforms that we are making are delivering real improvements in practice**. The programme of policy reform is still at a relatively early stage of implementation; understanding how effectively those reforms are improving the quality of teachers and teaching is therefore crucial as we think about what further changes we – and teachers themselves – might need to make, and how far we are achieving our vision of a “self-improving” system.

We also need research to look at where even more positive outcomes might be achieved by doing things differently. And **teachers themselves will play a central role in identifying and addressing research priorities** through their own practice, all contributing to a shared pool of knowledge.

The most important outcome of our shared approach to research should be that teaching practice becomes increasingly based on rigorous evidence of what works.

Research summary and gaps

Whilst evidence about the importance of good leaders, teachers and teaching is unequivocal, there are still some important gaps in the evidence base about how to secure the best possible teacher quality.

In terms of what teachers should be doing in the classroom, there is an important and growing international evidence base about what constitutes effective teaching practice. Responding to this, resources such as the Teaching and Learning Toolkit,⁴ for example, are providing a guide to effective teaching practice. Nevertheless, evidence gaps remain, particularly in terms of a paucity of data from the UK and studies about **how best to put effective techniques into practice in the classroom**.

We need to know more about how best to **find, nurture and develop outstanding teachers**. Rigorous selection and training is essential to building a strong pool of new entrants to the profession; ultimately this will improve the competitiveness, and hence the status, of teaching. This puts a premium on having in place an effective system of initial teacher training (ITT) that is able to identify and develop the best. International evidence suggests that ITT programmes linked to specific school needs can be more effective, especially when training is based on demonstration and peer-review.⁵ We have therefore given schools much greater responsibility for developing and delivering ITT; it is now important that we have a clear understanding of how effectively schools are responding to these reforms.

Effective teacher supply requires more than simply getting ITT right. Teachers, and would-be teachers, are participants in **the wider labour market**. We know from existing evidence that some schools find it much more difficult than others to recruit teachers. We also know that there are shortages in certain subjects, where classes are often taught by non-specialist teachers. And, whilst we know that pay is not the only thing that motivates teachers,⁶ it is nevertheless important to understand the impact that pay and conditions – both nationally and between schools in an increasingly autonomous system – have on teacher recruitment and turnover. As schools increasingly develop their own pay policies and systems we will need to know which approaches are proving most effective for recruiting high-quality teachers and developing them throughout their careers, including into leadership positions.

⁴ Sutton Trust/EEF (2013), *Teaching and Learning Toolkit*: [Teaching & Learning Toolkit](#)

⁵ Musset, P. (2010), 'Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Training Policies in a Comparative Perspective: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects', *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 48, OECD Publishing. Available at: [OECD Working Paper 48](#)

⁶ Ashby, P., Hobson, A., Tracey, L., Malderez, A., Tomlinson, P., Roper, T., Chambers, G., and Healy, J. (2008), *Beginner Teachers' Experiences of Initial Teacher Preparation, Induction and Early Professional Development: A Review of Literature*. University of Nottingham and University of Leeds, for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). Research Report DCSF-RW076. Available at: [Research Report DCSF-RW076](#)

Analysis of the evidence shows that, although the quality of teaching in many parts of the schools system is good, there is more that could be done to support the teaching profession to lead and sustain its own development and improvement. Large-scale policy reforms are changing expectations of teachers; different skills and capabilities will be required in future if teachers are to continue ensuring high-quality outcomes for all pupils.

We need to know how well the profession is adapting to the challenges of a changing education system.

Future priorities

The research questions identified below are intended as broad prompts; they have been formulated to help identify where further analytical and evaluative work might most usefully be focused – whether that work is undertaken by Government, by independent researchers, or indeed by teachers themselves. We also need to understand how these issues vary across the full diversity of England's schools system and its teachers. **These questions are intended to be reiterated at regular intervals, as gaps are addressed and new areas for investigation arise.**

Teacher quality

- What are the characteristics of the most effective teachers? How do they become “self-improving”?
- What are the main drivers of teacher quality and how can it be measured?
 - Are there reliable and predictive ways to measure teacher effectiveness/quality in schools (including ways which do not use pupil results)?
 - To what extent are teachers and leaders working across schools to develop their practice and what is its impact? What are the facilitators to good practice and what are the barriers?
 - What can we learn from models of peer observation and feedback, supervision and coaching and mentoring where this is already happening in other professions or elsewhere internationally?
 - What are the most effective ways of ensuring that knowledge from research influences teaching practice?
 - What are the most effective approaches to teachers' professional development, and how can schools embed such approaches in practice?

Teacher supply

- Which models of teacher training add the most value and produce the best quality teachers?
- Which approaches to developing and delivering initial teacher training result in the greatest impacts on learning? What benefits can different models bring?
- Which models of training provide the best value for money?
- What are the most effective approaches to attracting and retaining high-quality teachers in the profession?

System leadership

- What are the most effective models of leadership in the schools system?
- How are those models of system leadership delivering improvements to the quality of teachers and teaching?

Leadership

- What do the best school leaders do that adds the greatest value to improvements in the quality of teachers and teaching?
- How do different models of leadership succeed?
- Is there sufficient supply and quality of school leaders? How effective are the mechanisms which support supply?
- How are school leaders using their freedoms to employ and deploy teachers differently, and what is the impact of doing so?

Engaging with future priorities

Individuals or organisations could respond to this paper in various ways:

- Share with DfE any existing research evidence or current work relevant to questions. Email to Research.PRIORITIES@education.gsi.gov.uk.
- Prioritise research effort or bids in the light of the evidence questions.
- Debate evidence gaps and priorities with your own associations or other stakeholders. DfE would be interested to hear any views emerging - email as above.



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